A Cornish revival? The nascent iconization of a post-obsolescent language

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Abstract

This article considers the case of Cornish, a Celtic language that was in decline in the south-west of Great Britain from the early medieval era until the end of the eighteenth century, when its last recorded native speakers died out. At the point when a language under pressure eventually succumbs to forces of language shift, its role in representations of a distinct sociocultural identity might be expected to die with the medium itself. Yet a sense of cohesion at the group level has been observed to endure long after a shift to another language has occurred, with the obsolescent variety retaining a role in the maintenance of group boundaries. In situations of language shift, the meanings of such social constructions can change considerably, and the obsolescent variety may retain ideological associations with the group as an iconized symbol of identity. The analysis presented in this paper is based on an examination of the historical record as well as a synthesis of recent sociological research on Cornish. Attention will be drawn specifically to the manner in which the language has functioned as an icon of identity since the nadir of its decline as a spoken vernacular, through the 'Cornish Revival' of the twentieth century to the present day.

Keywords: language ideologies; language and cultural identity; Cornish studies; historical sociolinguistics

1. Introduction: Language shift, cultural identity and iconization in Cornwall

In modern sociolinguistic and anthropological scholarship, language is not generally regarded as an essential or determining feature of sociocultural identity (Romaine 2000; Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 2005; Edwards 2009, 2010; Makihara 2010; May 2012). May (2012: 129–130) asserts that language remains socially "significant" in many instances, however, maintaining strongly felt associations with identity. Kroskrity (2004: 509) notes that language "has long served as a key to naturalizing the boundaries of social groups", while Williams (2008: 74) similarly identifies language as one of the principal components of group identity. Whilst recognizing that there is "no necessary correspondence" between linguistic reproduction and ethnic identity, he argues that manifestations of identity "often continue long after a group's language declines" (Williams 2008: 88). Similarly, Mari Jones (1998: 243) states that the death of a language does not necessarily entail the death of the ethnicity with which it has traditionally been associated.

Propounding an altogether different view of the relationship, Eastman (1984: 274) interpreted language and identity as complex but entirely discrete structures, observing that "there is no one-to-one correspondence" between the two. The nature of the nexus connecting the two is therefore complex, to say the least. Edwards (2009: 55–56) argues that the *communicative* and *symbolic* functions of language are separable, and that the latter can remain important — as an "emblem of groupness, a symbol, a psychosocial rallying point" — in the absence of the former. It is in this sense that I would like to consider the language-identity nexus in respect of the Cornish language in Cornwall, in the south-west of Great Britain.

1.1. Iconization and the Cornish identity

Bucholtz and Hall (2004: 380) describe *iconization* as the ideological representation of a language variety "as formally congruent with the group with which it is associated"; in contrast to indexicality, which produces ideological associations through actual linguistic practice, iconization produces perceptions of practice through ideology. Crucially for our considerations, they state that "actual practice may be far removed from the imagined practices that ideology constructs" through processes of iconization (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 380; see also Adronis 2003; Valdez 2009, 2011; Zhang and Hok-Shing Chan 2017). Irvine and Gal (2000: 37) define iconization as the semiotic process by which the relationship between a given linguistic variety or feature and the "social images" it indexes are transformed; languages come to be seen as iconic representations of particular social groups, as if they "somehow depicted or displayed a social group's inherent nature or essence".

It seems clear that mobilizing such essentializing discourses alone will be inadequate for reversing language shift (RLS) in contexts such as that of Cornish (Fishman 1991, 2001). Indeed, Fishman (1991: 388) describes identity persistence as "purely phenomenological" and "no basic criterion of RLS", which requires much greater commitment to the maintenance of social behaviors and boundaries. Nevertheless, he states that languages,

identities and ethnicities "are more continuous and more gradual" than is often assumed in postmodern narratives which seek to address the relationship between the three (Fishman 2010: xxxiii). As Edwards (2010: 59) observes, to dismiss the symbolic value of an obsolescent language in the construction of identity as some kind of "ethnic 'residue'", or to regret "a cultural retreat" to psychological distinctiveness in the absence of a distinct spoken medium, is to overlook a range of perspectives that have proved to be meaningful to language users in diverse contexts (cf. Jaffe 2007).

Edwards (2009: 251) therefore argues that although language is by no means the only basis of cultural distinctiveness, it clearly is an important aspect, while the continued use of the traditional language "in ordinary, communicative dimensions" is not always required for a continued sense of group identity. Investigating the language–identity nexus in relation to ideologies and iconization requires close attention to scholarly understandings of essentialism. Bucholtz and Hall (2004: 380) describe iconization itself as a "process of essentialization" whereby the link between the linguistic and social life becomes viewed as inevitable. Crucially, researchers seeking to investigate ideological processes of linguistic iconization need not posit the existence of such a link. In his discussion of ethnic identities more generally, Joseph (2010: 12) remarks that although they effectively "essentialize what are actually arbitrary divisions among peoples... the fact that, once established, they exist as mental representations makes them every bit as real as if they were grounded in anything 'natural'".

As Bourdieu (1991) notes, it is possible to understand such interpretations "only if one transcends the opposition... between representation and reality, and only if one includes in reality *the representation of reality*" (Joseph 2010: 12, emphasis mine). The ways in which group boundaries and categories are socially and ideologically maintained is clearly an important facet of such representations; while accepting the view that language in its broader discursive sense "creates categorical reality rather than the other way around" (McCall 2004:

1777), I focus in this article on the Cornish context as a case study to shed light on the heterogeneity that exists within a particular group, and therefore potentially within social categories more widely.

1.2. Cornish in Context: Examining language, culture and history in Cornwall

Edwards (2010: 99) has argued that although an historical dimension is "essential for any meaningful study" of minority language situations, historians have generally neglected to account for language in their considerations, while researchers of language have largely failed to integrate history within their own endeavors. Of the latter case, he remarks that "examination of the historical record is sometimes downplayed" for not producing the kinds of data that are familiar to researchers in the sociology of language (Edwards 2010: 99). Similarly, Marfany (2010: 3) has lamented that mainstream sociolinguistics generally neglects a large number of questions regarding language and history, "foremost among which are those of the how and why of the birth and the death of languages". In a sense, therefore, the present article constitutes an exploratory attempt to address the potential shortcomings identified here, at least within the relatively nascent field of Cornish Studies.[1] I hope, however, that its implications for the wider study of language ideologies in minority language settings will be reasonably clear.

Since the turn of the present century, a developing research literature on the iconization of language has examined, among other things, ideological processes in relation to the standardization of Quicha in Ecuador (Andronis 2003), the philology of Spanish in the Dominican Republic (Valdez 2009, 2011), and linguistic landcapes in the multilingual city of Macau (Zhang and Hok-Shing Chan (2017). I position this article within this emerging

[1] The Institute of Cornish Studies (ICS) first opened in 1970 under the Directorship of Professor Charles Thomas, and the first series of the scholarly journal *Cornish Studies* ran from 1973–1988, before re-launching in 1993 under the editorship of the Institute's second Director, Professor Philip Payton. Under Payton's leadership the research profile and agenda of the ICS has expanded hugely, and several hundred articles have now been published in the *Cornish Studies* series. Yet the ICS is the only institution to offer Cornish Studies as a taught subject, and even here it is only available at postgraduate level.

literature, and suggest that the case of Cornish provides a fascinating case study in the language–identity nexus from an historical and contemporary perspective. A sense of cultural distinctiveness has endured the centuries in Cornwall, though it has drawn on various distinct symbols at different times. This article considers the relationship between cultural identity and the Cornish language by firstly tracing the decline of the language in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This historical examination of language death is followed by an account of Cornish society, identity, and the revival of the Cornish language from the end of the nineteenth century. Alongside the historical analysis, attention will be drawn to the various sources of identity that have characterized Cornishness from the end of the early modern period up to the present day. I would like firstly, however, to introduce a little of the socio-historical context.

Cornwall lies at the tip of the south-western peninsula on the island of Great Britain. In administrative terms, the ancient territory of Cornwall (*Kernow* in Cornish) today constitutes the western-most ceremonial county in England, stretching some 70 miles south and west into the Atlantic Ocean from its border with Devon at the River Tamar. At various points in its history, however, Cornwall has held the status of independent kingdom, Norman earldom, and royal duchy. The two names Cornwall and *Kernow* each reflect the cultural and linguistic history of the territory; the first element in each reflects the Roman name for the Celtic Britonnic tribe that inhabited the area at the time of conquest (the *Cornovii*) while *–wall* derives from the Germanic, Old English word *–wealas*, signifying '(Celtic) foreigner' (also found in the English name 'Wales'). The Celtic-speaking Britons first came into conflict with the Anglo-Saxon settler civilization in the early medieval era. In the south-west, King Athelstan of Wessex set the River Tamar as the border of his kingdom with the Cornish Britons in 936 (Payton 2004; Deacon 2007; Williams 2010).

The historical linguist Oliver Padel (2010) has demonstrated convincingly that language shift to English accelerated in south-west Britain from the early medieval period,

and that the Cornish language was obsolete in the eastern half of Cornwall by around 1300. On the basis of a minute examination of linguistic and onomastic evidence, he argues that this linguistic division (more or less corresponding to the paths of the Camel and Fowey rivers in mid–Cornwall) then constituted a stable linguistic boundary up until the mid-sixteenth century.

The general principles of this model are also propounded in Spriggs's (2003) re-examination of George's (1986) synthesis of linguistic evidence. Padel (2010) suggests that the language then experienced a sudden collapse in the second half of the sixteenth century, and that it had retreated to the utmost west of Cornwall by 1800. In a previous investigation of primary historical sources (Dunmore 2012) I have argued that the Cornish language was regarded in the sixteenth century as indexical of the conservative "Celtic Catholic" culture (after Payton 2004) that remained strong in the western half of Cornwall. Language shift accelerated from the middle of the sixteenth century, precipitated by the failure and suppression of the Prayer Book Rebellion of 1549. Cornish insurrection that year was largely a reaction against the imposition of the English language, Protestant *Book of Common Prayer* by the hard-line reformers of King Edward VI's regency council.

As Edwards (2010: 130) has pointed out, the coercive policies of Tudor monarchs in respect of Celtic languages arose principally from a desire to "consolidate political power... [and] promulgate religious unity" rather than from any specific concern with language. Nevertheless, much has been made of the 1549 rebels' assertion in their rejection of the *Book of Common Prayer* that, "we the Cornishmen, whereof certain of us understand no English, utterly refuse this new English" (Payton 2004: 123). Even if many of the Cornish rebels were Enlish monoglots, the iconic salience of the Cornish language is clearly conspicuous in their defence of Catholicism, and rejection of the new, Protestant prayer book. Among the remaining population of Cornish speakers, rapid language shift ensued in the aftermath of the 1549 rebellion. The subsequent stigmatization of the language and suppression of the

traditional culture on which it depended had a devastating impact on the remaining Cornish speakers of the west.

Even as the language declined rapidly in the early modern era, I have argued elsewhere (Dunmore 2012: 96) that the iconization of Cornish even at this early date can be clearly identified in Richard Carew's (1602 [2000]: 62) account of contemporary attitudes to English incomers. Carew noted specifically of the western Cornish people that:

> Most of the inhabitants can [i.e. know] no word of Cornish, but very few are ignorant of the English; and yet some so affect their own as to a stranger they will not speak it, for if meeting them by chance you enquire the way or any such matter, your answer shall be 'Meea navidna cowzasawzneck' [*I will speak no English*].

The monoglot Cornish-speaking population had been thus been in decline within the territory of Cornwall since the tenth century, though as Carew attests, a distinctive cultural identity had clearly endured, at least in western parts of Cornwall. Language shift among the remaining bilingual population in the sixteenth century was prompted, following the suppression of the 1549 rebellion, by a sociocultural shift away from the Celtic Catholic culture indexed by Cornish, to one dominated by high-church, Anglo-Catholicism, and English nationalism (Deacon 2007).

Yet a century and a half later, at the beginning of the industrial age, the Cornish language continued to be transmitted as the mother tongue of a steadily declining number of people in the far west of Cornwall, enduring as a spoken vernacular until (at least) the end of the eighteenth century (Payton 2004: 176). George (1986: 67) estimates that the number of Cornish speakers fell from around 20,000 in 1600 (around half the total population) to less than 5,000 at the start of the eighteenth century, by which time the total population of Cornwall had risen to over 100,000. A new sense of Cornish distinctiveness, no longer based primarily on a separate ethnolinguistic identity, was emerging by this time. As I hope to illustrate in the next section of this article, it was expanding in the eighteenth century, as new

symbols and traditions of Cornish distinctiveness became established. Deacon (2007: 89) has characterized this emergent sense of cultural cohesion as being grounded in a shared civic identity, based on the territory and economy of Cornwall. It is to the cultural and economic components of this emergent identity that I would now like to direct our attention.

2. Language obsolescence and the maintenance of difference: Cornwall's industrial revolution *c*.1700–1900

The Cornish language, and with it the cultural memory of medieval Cornwall, lingered on after a new sense of Cornish distinctiveness — based on territory and the precocious industrialization of the county — was taking root in the aftermath of the English Civil War (Deacon 2007). The fact that it survived in west Cornwall, the very region that was at the forefront of this process of industrialization, acted as an initial impetus in the emergence of a new sense of Cornish distinctiveness (MacKinnon 2005; Deacon 1997). In order to assess the specific role that the language played in the composition of this new identity, I now present an analysis of primary sources considering the state of the Cornish language in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, before moving on to address various historians' interpretations of the rise and fall of Cornwall's industrial identity over the same period.

2.1. Tracing the Cornish language in eighteenth century Cornwall

Having surveyed the Cornish language as part of his (1707) *Archæologia Britannica*, the Oxford scholar and pioneer of Celtic philology Edward Lhuyd prefaced his Cornish grammar with an assertion of his intention that "everyone might know to speak Cornish" (Pryce 1790: iv).[2] Yet the predicament of the language was such that Lhuyd did not consider revival to be an objective:

[2] The page number referenced here is from William Pryce's 1790 edition, which includes a reprint of Lhuyd's 1707preface. An electronic version of Lhuyd's original publication is available online (see list of citations).

> For my part, I am not very solicitous about keeping up the Cornish language, since it is not very necessary to the people who know very well how to speak English... But to preserve something of an Old Tongue in some printed book, is without doubt a thing very pleasing to scholars and gentlemen, and very necessary to our antiquaries. [Pryce 1790: vi]

In a 1701 letter to his colleague Henry Rowlands, Lhuyd reported that Cornish was by this time confined "to half a score parishes towards the Land's End", that is, the westernmost point of the Cornish mainland (Williams 1993: 25). Lhuyd goes on to list fourteen parishes, located "all along the sea shore" in the far west that retained the language, but explains that many of the inhabitants of those parishes neither spoke or understood it, "there being no necessity thereof, in regard there's no Cornish man but speaks good English" (Williams 1993: 30). At the time of Lhuyd's visits to Cornwall, a group of antiquarians based in Penzance were attempting to collect and record the remnants of the Cornish language (Williams 1993: 21). Individuals such as John Anstis, John Keigwin and William Gwavas were much more concerned with "keeping up" the language than Lhuyd himself, and were only too pleased to assist the Oxford man in his collecting endeavors (Williams 1993: 10).

Lhuyd's methods for collecting data on Cornish later came under criticism by revivalists as being overly reliant on antiquarians and amateur philologists, rather than the remaining Cornish-speakers of the south-western seaboard who still used it habitually (Williams 1993: 21). Among the latter were the Boson family of Newlyn, who demonstrated a fluent knowledge of the written language well into the eighteenth century. Writing at the end of the seventeenth century in *Nebbaz Gerriau dro tho Carnoack* ("A few words about Cornish"),[3] Nicholas Boson observed that "as the English [language] sent it [the Cornish language] into this narrow land at first, thus it is still bearing upon it without leaving to it any place but about the cliff and the sea" (Padel 1975b: 35).

[3] Text translated by Padel (1975b).

Bilingualism was still common in the far west of Cornwall in Nicholas Boson's time, but he avers that even here there was "more English spoken than there is Cornish", with no monolingual Cornish speakers remaining (Padel 1975b: 35–36). Yet the Bosons continued to speak, write and collect samples of Cornish, and Nicholas' son John kept up a literary correspondence with William Gwavas for several years after Lhuyd's death (Padel 1975b: 43–45). Their contemporary William Pryce (1790: iii) describes how individuals such as Gwavas and Keigwin, inspired by Lhuyd's initiatives, were "diligent in their endeavours to restore this object of their veneration [i.e. the Cornish language] to its former honours", by corresponding with native speakers and collecting all the material they could get hold of. When his work was published in 1769, the Cornish antiquarian William Borlase argued that the sooner the work of this kind could be undertaken "the greater likelihood there was that more of the language might be preserved" (Borlase 1973: 413). Even at this late stage, he expressed the hope that his work would contribute to the goal of "restoring the Cornish language" (Borlase 1973: 413). Yet by 1790, William Pryce (1790: v) regarded his job as "rescuing [the language] from oblivion", rather than actually restoring it. In somewhat startling terms, he in fact argued that the "the vulgar Cornish" was by this time so "corrupted" and "confined to the extremest corner of the county, and those ancient persons who still pretend to jabber it" so few, that he could only "wonder at my patience, and assume some merit to myself" (Pryce 1790: v).

The question of exactly how long use of the language endured in this manner has been a matter of some debate, but it seems certain that Dolly Pentreath (*c*.1692–1777) who is recalled in tradition as 'the last speaker' of Cornish, was survived by others who knew the language to varying degrees (Payton 2004: 176). The antiquarian Daines Barrington journeyed to Mousehole in west Cornwall in search of the language in 1768, eventually coming across Pentreath, a fisher-woman who, Barrington recounts "spoke in an angry tone of voice for two or three minutes, and in a language that sounded very like Welsh" (Warner

1809: 358). He noticed two of Pentreath's neighbors laughing heartily at the elderly lady's vehement response to his supposing she couldn't actually speak Cornish, thereby discovering they could at least understand the language.

Conducting a similar enquiry on a tour of west Cornwall in 1808, Rev. Richard Warner deduced from the testimonies of those he spoke to that Barrington's enquiries in search of the last Cornish speakers "were not so successful as they might have been, had he possessed more knowledge than he did of the subject" (Warner 1809: 357). Although he was unable to find any speakers of Cornish on his own tour of the region, Warner had "no doubt that it still lurked in some hole or corner... doomed probably to give up the ghost, without being again brought forward into public notice" (1809: 358–359). This particular prognosis would prove overly pessimistic, but Edwards (2010: 48) fairly observes that "formalised concern for Cornish took another century to gear up" after the death of Dolly Pentreath.

Yet in summing up that with the loss of their traditional language the Cornish had "lost almost all those provincial peculiarities" that distinguished them from the rest of England, Warner (1809: 359) overlooked new sources of cultural and socioeconomic distinctiveness that were (re-)shaping Cornish identity at this time. Indeed, the loss of the language as a spoken vernacular did not entail the complete disappearance of its memory from that society. The growth of deep hard-rock mining, particularly in west Cornwall, had occurred while the language was still spoken in that region, and MacKinnon describes how it therefore came to "contribute greatly" (2005: 219–220) to the vocabulary of an emerging industry.

Writing in 1769, Borlase (1973: 413) describes how Cornish also dominated in the technical terminology of "husbandry, fishing and building" in the eighteenth century, while the language remained present in over 80% of place-names in Cornwall (Deacon 1997). Deacon argues that the Cornish language was therefore taking on "a *symbolic* meaning almost as soon as it had been detached from its social base" in the late 1800s (1997: 14,

emphasis mine), indicating that the iconization of the Cornish language, albeit still in a rather limited capacity, was in progress at this time.

2.2. Mining and Methodism: Interpreting Cornwall's industrial identity

By the eighteenth century, the Cornish language had come to be used in a very different manner than had been true in previous centuries. Although it was associated tokenistically – and to some extent instrumentally – with industrial innovation in Cornwall, by the mid-1700s the predominant symbols of that society's distinctiveness derived from mining (Deacon 1997, 2018). The eighteenth century has been described as a "period of revolutionary transformation" for Cornish society (Rowe 1953: 40). Mining was not new to Cornwall — tin had been excavated widely since the thirteenth century — but the growth of copper mining from the early 1700s utterly transformed Cornish society (Payton 2004). Although the iconization of the language — remaining present in the place names and occupational terminologies of Cornwall — might be seen as embryonic at this stage, the twin pillars of mining and Methodism soon overtook language as the basis of a distinctive Cornish identity.

The invention of the blast reverbatory furnace at the end of the seventeenth century had enabled the sinking of deep mineshafts into Cornwall's mineral-rich interior (Halliday 1959). The growth of the brass industry in Bristol and Birmingham provided a ready market for Cornish copper, and vast wealth, attended by throngs of engineers and laborers from elsewhere in Britain poured into the western mining districts from this time (Buckley 1992). At its peak the mining industry directly employed one third of Cornwall's entire working population, with many more employed in auxiliary occupations reliant on the trade (Payton 2004). The production and performance of Cornwall's industrial identity was therefore cemented through communities of practice from one working day to the next (Wenger 1998; Bucholtz and Hall 2004).

Over the same period the Methodist Church was fast gaining ground in Cornwall, as John Wesley's reformers reaped the harvest of a growing disengagement with the established (Anglican) church. Methodist churches were established in 31% of Cornish parishes in 1785 but were present in 85% only thirty years later (Deacon 2007, 2018). Wesley's arrival in Cornwall in 1743 had been met with a full range of reactions, from evangelical fervor to outright hostility – and even violence (Haile 1988). Yet over a short time the Methodists' gospel of social engagement found a receptive audience in Cornwall's working population, many of whom lived in abject poverty (Foot 1988).

Methodism soon became the predominant religious identity of the Cornish people, with "momentous results on the social life" of Cornwall (Rowe 1953: 67). The egalitarian credentials of the Wesleyan tradition appealed to Cornish workers, whose lives had been touched little by the wealth created from the extraction of tin and copper. Cornish Methodism took on a "democratic flavour" seen by outsiders as a distinctive characteristic of Cornwall's identity (Deacon 1997: 20). The number of Cornish Methodist chapels proliferated hugely as a result of religious revivals between 1799 and 1814, and these buildings came to be seen increasingly as a marked and distinctive feature of Cornwall's landscape (Thomas 1988). Again, therefore, Cornish religious observance reinforced a sense of distinctive identity through sociocultural practice.

Deacon (1997: 12) argues that a compelling "discourse of differentiation" had emerged by the 1820s in Cornwall, as individuals and institutions sought to embrace the county's economic specialization and its cultural and religious distinctiveness. Yet the Cornish identity embodied in these symbols was nested within a strong sense of British identity, and often merged with a patriotic English identity (Deacon 2007, 2018). In-migration from elsewhere in Britain led to a growth in population to around 150,000 by the middle of the eighteenth century, an increase felt most keenly in the mining centers of west Cornwall (Halliday 1959).

Deacon (1997, 2018) suggests that the creation of institutions with a Cornwall-wide remit in the nineteenth century, such as the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* and numerous literary societies helped to explain why the popular identity of the time drew largely on the territory of Cornwall, demarcated from the early medieval era by the natural borders of the River Tamar and Atlantic Ocean. Without such institutional reminders of Cornwall's territorial integrity and historical identity, this new sense of identity could easily have found expression within larger or smaller geographical units, either also encompassing the mining districts of west Devon – which shared the Methodist faith of much of Cornwall (Payton 2004) – or restricted to the industrial heartland of west Cornwall and that region's enduring sense of otherness (Deacon 2007: 148). Instead, such reminders ensured that Cornishmen and – women from both eastern and western districts shared in an increasingly unified sense of territorial, religious and socioeconomic identity.

2.3. Nineteenth century socioeconomic decline

While the Cornish language, having lost its social base in the eighteenth century, retained a limited, symbolic role in representations of distinctiveness in the early years of industrialization, it had little to do with the popular identity of the mining Methodists of eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Cornwall. The embryonic iconization of Cornish had become swamped by the dominant images of mining technology and the non-Conformist chapel. Events in the coming century would see these potent images unravel, however, paving the way for processes of linguistic iconization to unfold once again.

If industry and Methodism were "the two central themes" of Cornish history in the eighteenth century (Halliday 1959: 266), the next century would lay bare the fragility of Cornwall's industrial economy (Payton 2004). Although a regional identity based on its unique economic attributes and "bound together" by Methodist religious observance was flourishing by the mid-1800s, the over-specialized Cornish economy was already on the brink

of ruin by that time (Deacon 1997: 12). “The Great Emigration” of young men to overseas mines began as early as the 1830s, and was at first celebrated as an international triumph of Cornish mining prowess (Payton 2004: 206). In truth it was all too indicative of the ability of mining centers in Australia, Chile and America to outcompete Cornwall in terms of both mineral output and manpower (Halliday 1959: 297).

The most easily extractable deposits of Cornish ore had largely been exhausted by the late eighteenth century, and many of the larger copper mines had long closed by the 1850s (Buckley 1992). Emigration continued, but in the later decades of the nineteenth century Cornish miners were being driven to the new world in search of work that was no longer available at home. Economic decline and de-industrialization stopped the new, self-confident regional identity of Cornwall in its tracks, and Deacon (1997: 21) states that the middle classes in particular began to look beyond Cornwall’s industrial peak in search of “more romantic images” of Cornish distinctiveness.

As discussed in section 2.2, above, the obsolescent Cornish language had been largely absent from representations of Cornwall’s industrial identity, and Payton (1997b: 102) suggests that it was in fact the Cornish dialect of English, particularly prevalent in eastern districts, that had come widely to be regarded “as an icon of Cornish industrialized society” by the nineteenth century. Yet the rapid process of de-industrialization in the second half of that century has been described as a dramatic “fall from grace” for Cornish self-image, which consequently fostered a widespread sentiment of “fatalism and resignation (Payton 1997c: 27).

In their Celtic ethnolinguistic heritage, the Cornish people possessed an icon of distinctiveness far enough removed from this feeling of helplessness to provide an attractive alternative to social images derived from mining. Deacon (2007: 150) asserts that the Cornish middle classes began to rediscover their Celtic roots as early as 1860. As this process gathered pace, some looked increasingly to the symbols of Celtic Catholic Cornwall —

"Cornish-speaking and unequivocally 'Cornish' in all its cultural attributes" — in their attempt to re-brand their own identities (Payton 1997c: 28). It is to this Cornish Revival that I would like to direct our attention in the next section. While the Cornish language, both as a spoken medium and icon of distinctiveness, had largely been absent from Cornish society for over a century by this time, its rehabilitation as a symbol of identity was again underway.

3. A Cornish Revival? Language and the re-branding of regional identity *c.*1900–*c.*2010

Various historians have therefore interpreted the emergence of a self-confident regional identity, based on the twin pillars of mining and Methodism, in the two centuries following the English Civil War. Yet in the same space of time, Cornwall's industrial culture had emerged, flourished and withered away. The emergence of its regional, industrial identity has subsequently been seen either to signify "a crucial break between modern... and Celtic Cornwall" (Tregidga 1997: 136), or to be part of a process of cultural layering, by which social processes associated with industrialization were employed together with "the older traditions of the Celt" in the construction of distinctiveness (Burton 1997: 156). I would like now to consider firstly how these cultural layers were re-imagined in the twentieth century, and how ongoing socio-economic transformations acted as a catalyst in this process. Finally, I reflect on findings from recent sociological and sociolinguistic studies of cultural identity and language attitudes in modern Cornwall.

3.1. Language and identity in the 'Cornish Revival'

1901 saw the foundation of the *Cowethas Kelto-Kernuak* [Celto-Cornish Society], while in the 1920s the Federation of Old Cornwall Societies was formed "to revive the ancient language and customs" of Cornwall (Hale 1997a: 101). Such initiatives formed the vanguard of what has been termed the Cornish Revival, a facet of the wider Celtic Revival of the period, witnessed elsewhere with the foundation of such groups as *An Comunn Gaidhealach* [The Highland Association] in Scotland (1871), the Society for the Preservation of the Irish

Language (1876) and *Conradh na Gaeilge* [The Gaelic League] (1893) in Ireland, and *Cymru Fydd* [Young Wales] around 1886 (Berresford Ellis 1974: 148). Pan-Celtic movements placed an emphasis on living Celtic languages as the prime markers of Celticity, a pre-condition that left Cornwall at a "distinct disadvantage" (Hale 1997b: 92). Yet Henry Jenner's 1904 address to the Celtic Congress in Caernarfon, Wales persuaded that organization's members to recognize Cornwall as a Celtic nation, and MacKinnon asserts that modern Cornwall undoubtedly "owes its sense of Celtic identity" (2005: 223) to this achievement.

The revivalists put the language at the very heart of their idea of Cornish distinctiveness, which they conceived in terms of Celtic nationhood rather than the English regionalism of industrial Cornwall. Jenner's *Handbook of the Cornish Language* was intended principally for "those persons of Cornish *nationality* who wish to acquire some knowledge of their ancient tongue" (Jenner 1904: ix, emphasis mine). Persuading Cornishmen to learn the language their ancestors had abandoned would be no mean feat, and anticipating a skeptical reaction Jenner asked: "Why should Cornishmen learn Cornish? There is no money in it, it serves no practical purpose, and the literature is scanty and of no great originality or value. The question is a fair one, the answer simple. Because they are Cornishmen" (1904: xi).

Jenner sought to de-legitimize conceptions of Cornish identity as a kind of regional Englishness, arguing that "proud as he may be of belonging to the British Empire, [the Cornishman] is no more an Englishman than a Caithness man [from the Scottish Highlands] is" (1904: xii). Instead, Jenner argued, the Cornish language should be to every Cornish person the principal icon of his or her distinct national identity; the Cornishman had every bit as much right as the Englishman to a feeling of "patriotism to his Little Motherland" (1904: xii). The language, he proposed, should be seen by every Cornishman as "the outward and visible sign of his separate nationality" (Jenner 1904: xii). The semiotic and metaphorical

iconization of the Cornish language as a symbol of distinctiveness was therefore an explicit objective of this father of the Cornish Revival.

Payton (1997c) states that although Jenner had seemed pessimistic vis-à-vis the goal of actually reviving the spoken language, his enthusiasm motivated other revivalists to this end (much as had been true of Lhuyd's work nearly 200 years previously). While Jenner himself strove to revive the 'Late' Cornish of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, later revivalists such as Robert Morton Nance and A.S.D. Smith regarded the Middle Cornish of 'Celtic Catholic' medieval Cornwall as a better base (Payton 1997c). Powerful language ideologies can be identified in these rival orthographical bases for the revived language, and the same linguistic ideological distinction survives to the present day within the Cornish language community. As far as Smith was concerned the "decline of Cornish in the eighteenth century need not be regretted", since the loss of native idiom and vocabulary under the influence of English would have left only a corrupted shell of a language; instead the Middle Cornish sources provided a compact linguistic corpus that afforded Cornish people the opportunity "to become Cornish in speech as well as name" (Smith 1947: 20).

For the revivalists of the early twentieth century, the language offered Cornwall the prospect of becoming once again more than "just another English county" (Smith 1947: 20). Yet while the Revival had succeeded in penetrating certain elements of the Cornish middle class, its aims remained obscure and unfamiliar to the vast majority of the Cornish population (Payton 1997c). Organizations such as the *Cowethas Kelto-Kernuak* "failed to draw upon the values and traditions that were already potent symbols" of identity, such as the county Rugby team, St. Piran's flag or the memory of industry (Hale 1997a: 110). Furthermore, the emphasis placed by the *Cowethas*' members on Celtic Catholic traditions was vexing to a public still overwhelmingly Methodist in its religious observances (Payton 1997c: 35–36). Against this background, the revivalists' message could not penetrate. As a result, Deacon states, revivalist institutions such as *Cowethas Kelto-Kernuak* "soon faded away", having

failed to translate their romantic and largely bourgeois aspirations to a more popular narrative (2007: 187). With their decline, the iconization of the Cornish language had, once again, misfired, although small numbers of speakers continued to use it. Again, therefore, the memory of Cornish as a spoken medium and an icon of identity endured, to be subsequently rekindled in light of further dramatic changes to the nature of Cornish society.

3.2. Cornwall's 'demographic revolution'

New challenges to Cornish distinctiveness emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, and Deacon states that a "demographic revolution" (2007: 207) occurred from 1952. In the 2001 UK census the population of Cornwall was over half a million, a rise of over 50% from the figure in 1901. While rapid population growth had occurred over the course of the industrial period, Mitchell (1993: 135) describes the demographic changes of the late twentieth century as "very different" from anything experienced before. Annual net migration figures increased rapidly over the 1960s and peaked first in the early seventies, and again in the mid- to late eighties (Mitchell 1993).

The largely middle-class nature of this in-migration led to stark contrasts in the lifestyles of wealthy newcomers and poorer locals, who often found themselves confined to social housing estates on the edge of town, as urban centers throughout Cornwall became increasingly gentrified (Deacon 2007). Such glaring social inequality might be expected to foster resentment, which, given Cornwall's unique history may have found expression in nationalist sentiment. *Mebyon Kernow* [Sons of Cornwall] was formed in 1951, at first as a cross-party pressure group, but which soon emerged as a political party with the self-declared aim of maintaining "the Celtic character of Cornwall and its right to self-government in domestic affairs" (Berresford Ellis 1974: 182). Promoting the Cornish language in education, alongside traditional literature, culture and sport was central to the group's political concerns (Deacon et al. 2003). Yet widespread Cornish opposition to "population-led growth",

imposed by policy-makers in Bristol and London failed to convert into political nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Mebyon Kernow failed to mobilize support as an electoral force in Cornwall then, and has never yet done so (Deacon 2007, 2018).

Yet on being appointed director of the Institute of Cornish Studies in Redruth, Professor Charles Thomas spoke of a "sense of national consciousness" (1973: 3) in Cornwall, the establishment of which he attributed to revivalists Henry Jenner and Robert Morton Nance. He emphasized that this national sentiment was not to be confused with political nationalism, but was, to his mind at least, rather more important and a "great deal harder to build up" (Thomas 1973: 3). In language reminiscent of the revivalists, Thomas argued that the cornerstone of this national consciousness was "the possession of a separate language" (1973: 7), and that the chief accomplishment of the Revival had been to raise awareness of this vital asset.

In rhetoric drawing heavily on ideologies of linguistic iconization, Thomas (1973: 10) deemed the mere existence of a distinct language to be "probably sufficient" to foster a sense of cultural distinctiveness. Yet Thomas perceived this feeling to be increasingly under threat from the drastic demographic changes taking place in Cornwall, anticipating an "internal social crisis" (1973: 14). He implored those "who *are* Cornish, and presumably value their identity, to stand up and be counted" in defense of it (Thomas 1973: 14).

Over subsequent years many Cornish people responded to this threat of identity loss by embracing different forms of cultural distinctiveness. As has been noted above, the concerns that people felt in this regard never translated to widespread support for nationalist parties. Payton (2003: 230) notes instead the growth of a widespread feeling of "anti-metropolitanism" from the1960s. Such feeling was largely linked to perceived attempts by Westminster governments to accommodate Cornwall within a 'South-west' regional planning paradigm, or worse, to foist a Devon-and-Cornwall (popularly pilloried as 'Devonwall') identity on the county (Payton 2003: 231–233). While it would be an overstatement,

therefore, to suggest that pro-Cornish sentiment never found political expression of any kind, it is clear that cultural considerations took precedence over partisan political ideology.

Deacon (2007) describes how the decades following the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a resurgence of Cornish identity, a phenomenon that he notes has been paralleled in other peripheral European regions faced with wide-spread in-migration from surrounding areas. In Cornwall the effects of the western European Ethnic Revival were reflected in the increased popularity of traditional Cornish music and dance, widespread use of the Cornish flag of St.Piran on homes and public buildings, and greater interest in Cornish history and the language (Deacon 2007).

3.3. Cornish language and identity in the 21st century

The demographic revolution of the twentieth century therefore promoted feelings of Cornish cultural identity, of which the language was increasingly regarded as an important part. The nature and depth of a distinctive Cornish identity, both historically and in the present day, has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. While Burton states that one cannot "deny that there is a sense of being Cornish felt by certain people" (1997: 151), the sociolinguist Mari Jones insists, on the contrary, that "Cornwall is not a nation and is not perceived as such by its people" (1998: 347). She insists that Cornish identity should rather be understood as equivalent to other regional English identities, such as that articulated by "Geordies" in the north-east of England (Jones 1998: 347). To Jones the chief problem in attributing a role to the Cornish language as a token of distinctive identity is that "between the twelfth and mid-eighteenth century there existed at least six different systems" of orthography, so that there is "no uniform variety to serve as an emblem of Cornish identity" (Jones 1998: 337).[4] By

[4] Jones's meaning here is somewhat unclear. Orthographic variation and change is surely a feature typical of language all over the world. It is certainly true that issues of orthography were contested among small numbers of Cornish revivalists from the later twentieth century, as I will describe shortly. Nevertheless, it seems more likely that it was language obsolescence resulting from over three hundred years of language shift, rather than the lack of a standardised orthography as such, that would inhibit its being regarded as an emblem of Cornish identity.

contrast, Payton maintains that the Cornish language has been increasingly seen "as a powerful symbol of separate identity" in recent decades (1999: 423).

While Cornwall is often felt (particularly by outsiders, but also by some insiders) to occupy "the same conceptual space" as any other English county, it is viewed as much more than that by many living in Cornwall today (Deacon et al. 2003: 1). Modern Cornish identity is seen as "notoriously difficult to define" (Seward 1997: 173), although Willett's 2008 study on perceptions of Cornish identity offers an illuminating set of data on the phenomenon. Of her sample of 150 across several Cornish towns, 73% saw Cornwall as "more than a county", comparable to the nations of Wales and Scotland (Willett 2008: 195). 59% felt themselves to be Cornish, and 41% felt "more Cornish than English", while for over a third of respondents the Cornish identity formed their primary national identity (Willett 2008: 199). Genealogy and family history were considered the chief criteria for 'being' Cornish, particularly among those who possessed such ties, while being born in the county was also held to be important (Willett 2008: 199–200).

An earlier qualitative study by Aldous and Williams (2001: 217–219) reported similar findings. Although only 29.2% of 15-18 year olds in six Cornish schools they surveyed defined themselves as Cornish, a larger proportion maintained that Cornwall was more like Wales or Scotland than, for instance, the south-western English counties of Devon or Somerset (Aldous and Williams 2001: 222). Again, place of birth and parental origins were the most common reasons given for asserting a Cornish identity in interviews. The language was often regarded as an important symbol of a separate Cornish ethnicity, comparable to the black and white flag of St. Piran. One respondent commented: "[Cornwall has] got its own flag [and] it's got its own language... Cornish is, you know, it is like, almost a breed, a race" (Aldous and Williams 2001: 222). Linguistic iconization can be interpreted in this extract, wherein the language is seen to function as an icon of an essentialized cultural identity. Aldous and Williams (2001: 223) conclude that the "emergent and changing nature" of

Cornish identity expressed by their interviewees is part of macro-level processes of identity negotiation in a fast-changing world. They offer the tentative conclusion that "identification with Cornish *ethnicity* may be increasing over time" (Aldous and Williams 2001: 219, emphasis mine).

A quantitative research project conducted in 2008 by the present author found that 58% of 121 secondary pupils in a west Cornwall school felt themselves to be either "Fairly" or "Very" Cornish, while 80% felt either "Fairly" or "Very" English (Dunmore 2011: 73). Whilst these data might suggest that a sense of Cornish identity may indeed be increasing among young people over time, the fact a majority of respondents to both Willett's and my own study felt Cornish and English identity to be nested and compatible seems to go against Aldous and Williams' suggestion of a heightened sense of *separate* Cornish ethnicity.

The value attached specifically to the Cornish language in negotiating the complexities of modern Cornish identity is difficult to define, largely on account of the language's small size. MacKinnon's (2000) *Independent Study of the Cornish Language* emphasized that there was a stark absence of data on the numbers, abilities, usage and attitudes of Cornish speakers, or on the attitudes of the Cornish public to the language. To some extent this situation was rectified with the results of Cornish Language Partnership's (2008) *Cornish Language Survey*. Where MacKinnon estimated the total number of learners and users of Cornish at 1000 in total, the 2008 survey of "Cornish users" of all kinds identified just 115 "competent and frequent users" of the language (Cornish Language Partnership 2008: 47).[5] In this survey, contact was made with the total sample of 710 through each of the various Cornish language organizations and a number of other to cultural groups, in addition to websites and notices in community venues, with respondents also passing questionnaires on to other interested parties they knew. All of this was additionally

[5] Individuals were thus defined if they were able to speak at least simple conversational Cornish, to write at least "simple statements" and to read at least "simple paragraphs" in Cornish, and who exercised each of these competences "at least once a week" (Cornish Language Partnership 2008: 47).

"complemented by snowball sampling" (Cornish Language Partnership 2008: 3). It was hoped that this somewhat ad hoc methodology would provide a "fairly comprehensive and representative picture of the current users of Cornish", though it was conceded that this cannot be known for certain (Cornish Language Partnership 2008: 3).

The clearest picture we currently possess is therefore one of a tiny language community, with an even smaller number of regular users. Furthermore, the 1980s saw a breakdown of consensus on which written form of the language should be revived, and the bitterness with which issues of orthography were subsequently contested between minute factions has at times been breathtaking (Payton 1999; Williams 2010). The establishment of the Cornish Language Partnership in 2005 brought together a number of public and private bodies with the aim of promoting Cornish and further developing the language in public life. The six different language groups' agreement in 2008 on a single written form of the language (the 'SWF') appeared to set the revival on a new footing, with the SWF emerging as a standard for use in schools and in public life generally (Bock and Bruch 2008: 1).[6] A gradual movement toward a more *polynomic* model of orthographic conventions is this discernible in this significant agreement.

While the different groups agreed (at times, perhaps, reluctantly) that the SWF – a linguistic "common ground" between the various revived forms – should proceed as the variety for use in public life, it was also agreed that each group would continue to use and promote their own preferred variety (Bock and Bruch 2008: 1). Interestingly, in this connection, Jaffe (2003: 515) describes a polynomic language as being "defined both by its internal variation... and by speakers' recognition of linguistic unity in diversity". In the

[6] The six orthographic varieties represented in meetings on the SWF were Unified Cornish, Kernewek Kemmyn ['Common Cornish'], Modern Cornish, Unified Cornish Revised, Kernowak Standard ['Standard Cornish'] and Kernewek Dasunys ['Re-unified Cornish']. These six varieties can essentially be divided into two groupings: Revived Middle Cornish (based on the relatively abundant literary sources surviving from the medieval era) and Revived Late Cornish (based on the variety spoken in the eighteenth century).

Corsican context Jaffe describes, this principle of unity in diversity has become "the cornerstone of linguistic identity and value" within the language community (Jaffe 2003: 517). The Cornish community has some way to go before such a principle can guide the discussion of linguistic and orthographic varieties, but the Corsican example, similarly characterized by "a long history of often heated debate" over how to spell the language (Jaffe 2003: 521), could provide extremely useful lessons for the Cornish language community.

MacKinnon (2004) suggests that heated disputes over orthographic technicalities contested among the various language groups appeared, ironically, to have stimulated public awareness of the language. This objective was in fact identified as a priority in Cornwall County Council's *Strategy for the Cornish Language*, alongside "making the language more visible" throughout the county (Cornwall County Council 2004: 13). Public bodies of this kind have a vital role to play in the provision of status planning measures in Cornwall, and as Fishman (2010: xxviii) points out in regard to such considerations, "[c]onsciousness raising is identity raising." Despite the small size and fractured nature of the Cornish language community, public initiatives in this vein are likely to have contributed, in recent years, to the iconization of Cornish among the overwhelmingly monoglot English-speaking population.

Deacon explains that the lack of a sizeable speaker base counts against the language being viewed as anything more than an "affective" marker of cultural identity generally (1993: 207), although it has been shown that individuals with an already advanced appreciation of their Cornish identity often turn to the language to express this (Ivey & Payton 1994: 157). It is in this way — as an affective identity marker — that I argue the Cornish language, despite its small size, can be seen to retain some salience in Cornish identity; iconized as a totemic symbol in representations of distinctiveness. Although more empirical research is needed to expand on this interpretation, recent work of my own has produced some surprising results in this regard.

50% of respondents to my 2008 survey thought that "Cornwall would lose its separate identity without the Cornish language", while 32% disagreed; similarly 54% agreed that "Cornwall would not really be Cornwall without Cornish-speaking people", with only 33% disagreeing (Dunmore 2011: 75). Meanwhile an even greater proportion (59%) agreed that "The Cornish language is an important part of the Cornish identity", with just 22% disagreeing (Dunmore 2011: 76). These results struck me as surprising, coming in spite of the fact that only 6.6% of 121 respondents claimed any ability to speak Cornish beyond "a few basic words" (Dunmore 2011: 77). I suggest that the iconization of the Cornish language can therefore be seen to be progressing, at least among this group of young people in west Cornwall.[7]

Many learners explicitly relate their motivations to a desire to express their identity, and a number of MacKinnon's informants explained that they were learning the language to stress that they were "not English", or to become "as Cornish as possible" (2004: 276). Another study conducted among Cornish language supporters in 2005 found the language–identity nexus to be central to learners' motivations, with one interviewee commenting that "you can't separate the two things" (Sayers 2009: 265). Another explained that learning the language afforded individuals in Cornwall "a sense of place, a sense of identity, [and] a sense of what the place is about" (Sayers 2009: 266).

For many Cornish people today the language revival remains perplexing as a minority interest. Nevertheless, many clearly do regard the Cornish language as one icon among many – including St. Piran's flag, the Cornish rugby teams, Cornish pasties, steam engines, brass bands and folk music – that serve as an emblem of an assertive Cornish identity (Payton 2004: 285). The synthesis of old and new, of the Celtic and industrial histories in this way is seen by Burton (1997: 161) to form a "cultural text" of Cornish identity. There is an

[7] These initial findings piqued my interest in the iconization of language generally; the Cornish context would benefit from detailed ethnographic research on the nature of cultural identity and language ideologies in the lives of new speakers, learners and non-speakers there.

increasing appreciation, for instance, that the language helped to define the Cornish as a distinct ethnic group up until the seventeenth century (Deacon et al.2003). It is observed that the language is regarded by many today as an aspect of Cornish heritage "with *symbolic application as an icon of Cornishness* rather than a part of everyday life" (Deacon 2007: 229, emphasis mine). The Cornish identity is seen, therefore, to persist in the twenty-first century, with the language often seen as an important aspect of it.

4. Conclusion

Payton sees Cornwall's "condition of peripherality" (1992: 241) as central to the persistence of its identity through history. As I hope I have demonstrated, it is an identity which has drawn on different symbols at different times. Over the last three hundred years the Cornish language has functioned both as a living spoken medium and as an iconized symbol of the various incarnations of this peripheral identity. Varying degrees of importance have been attached to Cornish throughout history, the language having served as an emblem of distinctiveness alongside a multitude of other cultural, linguistic and economic icons at different points. If these different sources of identity have sometimes eclipsed the language in terms of visibility and importance, at others they formed layers of the same cultural text in conjunction with it.

Today, the rudiments of the language are on display throughout Cornwall in symbolic displays of identity, and many people are aware of its story. The extent to which it is regarded as an icon of Cornish identity by those who express it is a question with potentially crucial implications for language planners in Cornwall, and one that demands much further research. An in-depth, ethnographic investigation of these unanswered research questions would, in my view, provide a valuable contribution not just to the fields of Cornish and Celtic Studies, but to the literature of language, identity and iconization internationally (see Adronis 2003; Valdez 2009, 2011; Zhang and Hok-Shing Chan 2017).

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